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NEPAL COURT ORDERS RELEASE OF SERIAL KILLER CHARLES SOBHRAJ

Sobhraj, 78, has been in prison since 2003 for killing two American tourists in Nepal. He will be freed on health grounds, Nepal SC said

STARTED HIS MURDER SPREE IN THAILAND IN 1975

Sobhraj is a French citizen of Vietnamese and Indian parentage who speaks several languages. After a troubled childhood and prison terms in France for petty crimes, Sobhraj began travelling and wound up in Bangkok. Suave and sophisticated, he was implicated in his first murder of an American woman, whose body was found on a beach in Pattaya wearing a bikini, in 1975 | P12

SPENT 21 YEARS BEHIND BARS IN INDIA

- He was arrested in Delhi in 1976, after a French tourist died from poisoning at a hotel, and was sentenced to 12 years for murder
- Sobhraj spent 21 years in jail, with a brief break in 1986 when he escaped but was caught in Goa. He was released in 1997 and went to Paris but was arrested in Nepal in 2003 for two murders there

20
NUMBER OF KILLINGS LINKED TO SOBHRAJ. HIS VICTIMS WERE STRANGLED, BEATEN OR BURNED

CHENNAI • MADURAI • VIJAYAWADA • BENGALURU • KOCHI • HYDERABAD • VISAKHAPATNAM • COIMBATORE • KOZHIKODE • THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • BELAGAVI • BHUBANESWAR • SHIVAMOGGA • MANGALURU • TIRUPATI • TIRUCHY • TIRUNELVELI • SAMBALPUR • HUBBALLI • DHARMAPURI • KOTTAYAM • KANNUR • VILLUPURAM • KOLLAM • TADEPALLIGUDEM • NAGAPATTINAM • THRISSUR • KALABURAGI

Govt on Covid alert, screening of fliers begins

Cases of contagious Omicron subvariant BF.7 driving China's surge, found in India...

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

WITH at least three cases of the Omicron subvariant that is driving the Covid surge in China being reported in India, Union Health Minister Mansukh Mandaviya on Wednesday held a high-level review meeting and announced a series of steps to deal with it.

While urging people to realise that Covid is not over yet, he announced the stepping up random screening of international passengers at airports, especially those who are travelling from countries reporting a spike in cases. Mandaviya also urged people to wear masks in crowded places and take booster doses.

The subvariant the world is worried about is called BF.7. While its first case in India was detected in October in Gujarat, the second one was detected a month later from the same state. The third case was from Odisha.

Besides China, BF.7 has been detected in countries like the US, the UK and European Union, Belgium, Germany, France and Denmark.

Mandaviya advised all states and Union territories to send samples daily of all Covid-19 positive cases to INSACOG labs to facilitate tracking the new variants. He noted the importance of being prepared and remaining alert against new and emerging strains, especially given the upcoming festive season. He also urged people to follow Covid-appropriate behaviour.

India has been witnessing a steady decline in cases, with average daily count falling to 158 in the week ending December 19. However, a consistent rise in global cases has been reported in the last six weeks, with 5.9 lakh average daily cases reported in the week ending December 19. The case count is particularly high in China, Japan, South Korea, France and the US.

Incubation short, is highly transmissible

BF.7, a sub-lineage of Omicron variant BA.5, has the strongest infection ability since it is highly transmissible, has a shorter incubation period and a higher capacity to cause reinfection or infect even those vaccinated

TAC CHAIR SUGGESTS 3 MEASURES FOR K'TAKA

Bengaluru: COVID-19 Technical Advisory Committee chairman Dr M K Sudarshan has suggested 3 precautionary measures to followed: Mandatory wearing of masks indoors, getting booster doses and Covid testing of those who are symptomatic. P3

SUDHAKAR: ALL MUST TAKE BOOSTER SHOT

Bengaluru: Karnataka Health Minister Dr K Sudhakar urged people to take the booster dose of the Covid-19 vaccine. Flyers at Bengaluru airport are being screened and new guidelines on tackling the spread of the virus will soon be issued, he said. P3

NY CELEBRATIONS IN BENGALURU DOUBTFUL

Bengaluru: Following the Union Health Ministry's advisory to states, the upcoming New Year celebrations on Brigade Road and MG Road in Bengaluru, which attract thousands of revellers from across the state, remain doubtful. P3

Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during his Bharat Jodo Yatra in Nuh in Haryana on Wednesday. No pandemic protocol is being followed | PTI

...Cong bristles at Centre's pandemic advisory to Yatra

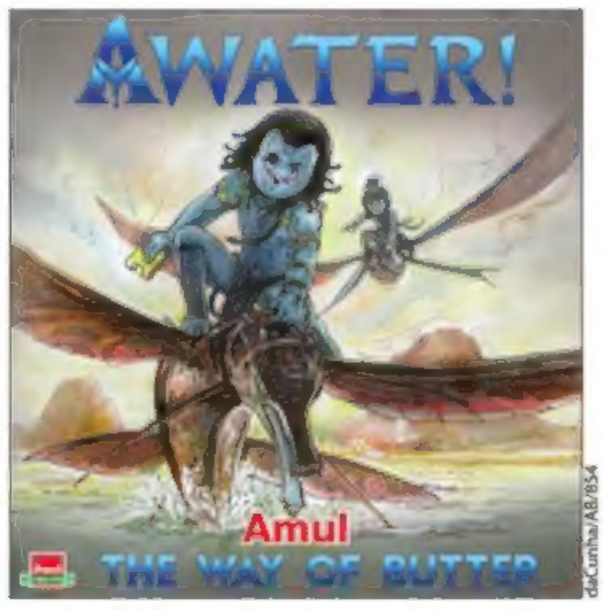
EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

AMID concerns over Covid cases, a political slugfest broke out on Wednesday after Union health minister Mansukh Mandaviya wrote to Rahul Gandhi, asking him to ensure Covid-19 guidelines are followed during the Bharat Jodo Yatra or to suspend it in "national interest", with the Congress taking on the BJP, and accused it of playing politics.

In his letter dated December 20, the minister requested the Congress leader to ensure Covid guidelines, including masks and sanitisers, are strictly followed, and only those vaccinated are allowed to participate in the Yatra.

"If Covid protocol cannot be followed, then, given the public health emergency, and to save the country from the Covid pandemic, I request you to suspend the Bharat Jodo Yatra in the national interest," the letter said.

Reacting to the letter, Congress leader Jairam Ramesh said, "Public health is far too serious an issue to play party politics. If there is a protocol for gatherings, Bharat Jodo Yatra will abide by it." Later speaking to reporters, Mandaviya said it is his "duty to ensure Covid doesn't spread in the country".



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CJI proposes, govt disposes any relook in age of consent

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ New Delhi

DAYS after Chief Justice of India D Y Chandrachud urged Parliament to address concerns related to the age of consent under the POCSO Act, which criminalises consensual sex even in romantic relationships for those under the age of 18, the Centre emphatically ruled it out on Wednesday.

The question "does not arise", Women and Child Development Minister Smriti Z. Irani told the Rajya Sabha in a written reply to a question whether the government is considering changing the age of consent for consensual relationships to 16 years from the present 18. She said the POCSO Act to safeguard children from sexual abuse and sexual offences, clearly defines a child below the age of 18 years.

Raut: China-like stealth to enter K'taka

NAUSHAD BIJAPUR @ Belagavi

THE ongoing Karnataka-Maharashtra border issue took a new turn on Wednesday with senior Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray) and Rajya Sabha member from Maharashtra, **Sanjay Raut** kicking up a fresh row by saying, "Like China entered the country, we will enter Karnataka. We don't need anyone's permission. We want to solve it through discussion but Karnataka CM (Basavaraj Bommai) is igniting fire."

Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai was quick to reply to the controversial statement by saying, "Just like how Indian soldiers chased Chinese soldiers away, we all Kannadigas will do the same."

Speaking to the media in Belagavi on Wednesday, Bommai said, "We are not a country that will be attacked by others. We are all living in the same nation. Anyway, I will give a fitting reply (to Raut) and also bring the issue to the notice of Union Home Minister Amit Shah."

The CM also said he would make a statement in this regard in the legislative assembly on Thursday.

Earlier, Bommai said, "It seems Maharashtra leaders have lost their mental balance if one goes by the way they have been speaking about the border issue both inside and outside the House. They are bent upon politicising the issue. The NCP leaders too had resorted to this kind of politics in the past, but failed. They will fail again."

He also said that the leaders of opposition parties in Maharashtra should stop issuing irresponsible statements on the boundary issue. P4

Just like how Indian soldiers chased Chinese soldiers away, we all Kannadigas will do the same. I will give a fitting reply (to Raut)

Basavaraj Bommai, Karnataka CM

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Panel to save monuments sits in crumbling edifice!

B K LAKSHMIKANTHA @ Mysuru

IN an irony of sorts, a 127-year-old building, where authorities conduct meetings to discuss how to protect heritage structures in Mysuru, is itself in a dilapidated condition. The building houses the deputy commissioner's (DC) office, where Mysuru District Heritage Committee, headed by the DC himself, holds regular meetings to discuss the maintenance and renovation of heritage structures in the district.

The committee also comprises heads of various departments and heritage experts.

Lack of maintenance for years has led to the growth of huge plants and weeds inside the walls, which have developed cracks. The lives of hundreds of staff members who are working in various departments housed in the heritage building are at risk.

Mysuru District Heritage Committee member Prof N S Rangaraju told *The New Indian Express*, "It's been two years since the plaster around the kalasha on the dome, which acts as a lightning arrester, came off. I have been telling the authorities to repair it but to no avail.

There has been extreme callousness on the part of the authorities in maintaining heritage structures".

Plants growing out of cracks in the building which houses the DC's office in Mysuru | UDAYASHANKAR S

The two-storeyed DC office with 27 rooms was built in 1895 by Mysuru Maharaja, where Mysore Representative Assembly meetings were held. Despite a new District Office Complex built in Siddartha Layout on Bannur Road during the Siddaramaiah-led state government, the office is yet to shift to the new building.

Most of the plants growing on the structure belong to the Arali Mara species, seeds of which are brought by birds. The plants start to grow when rainwater starts stagnating in the building. The sand and moisture allows the roots to spread inside the walls. During maintenance work, workers remove the outer part of the plants but the roots inside the walls continue to grow deep, Rangaraju said. P4

EXPRESS READ

Sangh's outreach with X'mas event

T'Puram: The Sangh Parivar has stepped up efforts to woo the Christian community with a Union minister officially hosting a Christmas feast and an RSS-affiliated organisation organising another event. Church heads from J&K to Kerala are expected to attend the party organised by the Rashtriya Christian Manch in Delhi on Friday. P5

Security up for shifting of dargah

Dharwad: Prohibitory orders were imposed and security beefed up from Tuesday night as the district administration started work on shifting the Hazrat Syed Mahmood Shah Qadri Dargah in Hubbali on Wednesday. The dargah is being shifted for road widening work as part of the BRTS corridor after a court recently vacated the stay order brought by the Muslim community. P5

B'luru techie ends life by inhaling nitrogen gas

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE @ Bengaluru

A 51-year-old software engineer suffering from heart-related problems ended his life by inhaling nitrogen gas and covering his face with a plastic cover sitting inside his car. The deceased has been identified as Vijay Kumar, a resident of Mahalakshmi Layout.

"Investigations revealed that Vijay Kumar had parked the car and told a roadside paani puri vendor that he was feeling very tired and would rest in the car. He gave him some money requesting him to put the car cover after he sits inside. The body was found on the rear seat and Kumar had covered his face with a plastic cover before sticking a pipe attached to a nitrogen cylinder in his nostril. Prima facie, he died by inhaling nitrogen, but we are awaiting medical reports," the police added. P3